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ABSTRACT

Academic dishonesty is a concern at any educational level. However, many faculty members feel uncomfortable with delivering courses in the online environment due to a concern that students may find it easier to participate in academic dishonesty than they would in a traditional classroom. This paper looks at factors that are considered to influence academic dishonesty and how these factors can be considered in the design of online courses to promote academic integrity. The paper investigates the following: reasons for academic dishonesty; academic dishonesty in the online environment; and possible ways to design online courses so that academic integrity is encouraged and academic dishonesty is discouraged. (Author/AEF)

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That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It: Promoting Academic Integrity in the Online Environment

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Abstract: Academic dishonesty is a concern at any educational level. However, many faculty members feel uncomfortable with delivering courses in the online environment due to a concern that students may find it easier to participate in academic dishonesty than they would in a traditional classroom. This paper looks at factors that are considered to influence academic dishonesty and how these factors can be considered in the design of online courses to promote academic integrity.

Introduction

Academic dishonesty is a concern for many instructors whether they teach in high school, two-year or four-year institutions. Academic dishonesty may include cheating on examinations, plagiarizing, falsifying sources or bibliographies, knowingly helping other students cheat, working together on projects that should be completed independently, or turning in the same assignment for more that one course (Dean, 2000). With the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web, there seems to be an attitude among instructors that academic dishonesty is easier because of the availability of material that can easily be cut and pasted (Renard, 2000). Course delivery through the online environment may also make it easier for students to cheat since students and instructors do not have the same relationship in an online course as they do in a face-to-face course. Investigating reasons for academic dishonesty in face-to-face and online environments may help shed some light on ways to develop online coursework that encourages academic integrity rather than leaving students to their own devices in which they may be tempted toward academic dishonesty. This paper will investigate the following: 1) reasons for academic dishonesty; 2) academic dishonesty in the online environment; 3) possible ways to design online courses so that academic integrity is encouraged and academic dishonesty is discouraged.

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Reasons for academic dishonesty

Measuring the incidence of academic dishonesty is usually done through self-report surveys given to students. McCabe and Trevino (1996) reported that from a sample of 1,800 students at nine different state sponsored universities, seventy percent of students surveyed admitted to cheating on exams. Additionally, it was reported that eighty-four percent admitted to cheating on exams and almost fifty percent admitted to working with others on assignments intended to be independent (McCabe & Trevino, 1996).

Several factors seem to be associated with the incidence of academic dishonesty. Dean (2000) has identified four of these as patterns seen in the literature: individual characteristics, peer group influences, instructor influences, and institutional policies.

Individual characteristics include ideas such as age, gender, social activities and level of academic achievement (Crown & Spiller, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Peer group influences indicate that general student disapproval of cheating is most likely to discourage it while peer group acceptance of cheating is likely to encourage it (Crown & Spiller, 1998). Students who take courses with instructors who are perceived as being actively involved and concerned about students are less likely to be involved in academic dishonesty (Crown & Spiller, 1998). Institutional policies that are communicated clearly to students along with the penalties for academic dishonesty are likely to reduce the occurrence of academic dishonesty (Crown & Spiller, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1996).

Considering these factors in regular academic classrooms, it would seem that the same kinds of academic dishonesty would occur in the online environment for the same reasons. Additionally, it may be more tempting or easier to engage in academic dishonesty in an online course than in one that is face to face. Renard (2000) states that although plagiarism is not new, Internet "cheat sites" have made cutting and pasting written sections or even entire papers easier. Students involved in an online course would be using the Internet consistently so the ease of using these sites could be tempting. Additionally, the perception of the instructor being less involved in an online course could encourage academic dishonesty since that is one of the factors that can influence a student's decision to cheat.

Academic dishonesty in the online environment

In recent years the popularity of the Internet has continued to grow among the general population around the world. In the United States alone, what was once considered a communication novelty is rapidly being perceived as an educational necessity in many homes. Along with the increased popularity of the Internet, especially the World Wide Web, many institutions of higher education are rushing to convert an increasing number of courses to online delivery. With the rush to offer courses online, there has arisen questions as to the reasons for both higher education institutions and their students to desire this type of course delivery. Many of these questions devolve down to a question of the quality versus quantity.

There are varied opinions about the correct answers to the questions that arise from the use of the Internet to deliver online courses. In order to be able to answer these questions, we must have a basis of understanding of what both students and instructors

perceive and desire about the use of online course delivery. Many of these perceptions are nothing more than myths or folklore taken from past popular beliefs and science fiction. Others come from a misunderstanding of the perceptions held from the various entities (students, instructors, and administrators) associated with online course delivery (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

Faculty who design courses to be delivered online may evaluate the time a student should spend in a traditional classroom for an equivalent course, add to it time that should be spent outside of class, and in some cases, add extra requirements due to the student not having to physically drive to a campus-based classroom. Faculty may see these students as being able to connect to the online course and go right to work with the course materials. Often faculty do not consider that the physical environment in which the student is taking the course may not be the optimal environment for student success. As student work begins to be turned in, possibly at a level below the expected standard, the instructor may feel that the rigor of the course is being challenged and therefore try to compensate by adding additional work. On the other hand, if the work submitted by the student is of a higher than expected standard, the faculty member may suspect that the student may be using inappropriate aids in completing course assignments.

In contrast, students may see themselves as being somewhat timid with the technology needed for a particular course. Additionally, these students may not see themselves as having the time to make traditional classroom courses, especially since many online students manipulate their course schedule around work or family obligations (Gibson, 1999). Some students feel that the online courses may be easier than a campus delivery due a perception about having to only interact with course content, not with the instructor. Students who have done poorly with a particular class may feel that taking the professor out of the loop will in some way help them pass the course. In this case, students who may not have the strongest work ethic may be enrolled in courses requiring a stronger work ethic. With all cases, it is easy for the student to become overextended in their time and commitment to the course. This can lead to a situation where students feel that they are required to do too much work for the credit earned in the course.

The above mentioned scenarios for both faculty and students set the stage for many of the factors that can lead to discomfort and the temptation for academic dishonest. Faculty members who are working to move to the online environment may feel detached from their students, feeling that they really do not have the kind of relationship that they would have if the same students were in a traditional classroom. In a traditional classroom, faculty can "look-in-the-eyes" of their students and make some determination about a students feelings and needs. Not having this direct contact may lead the faculty member to begin to be suspicious about the rigor of the course and then ultimately the quality and originally of student assignments.

The lack of direct contact and a feeling of detachment also may profoundly affect students. Students who already have very busy schedules may be compelled to take online courses due to the belief that they can add their academic work on top of an already busy lifestyle. Once the demands of the course become overwhelming, especially in cases where the instructor may feel that the rigor of the course is being challenged, the student may feel that the course requirements are unreasonable for the credit to be awarded. Once students begin to feel that the course requirements are unreasonable, the temptation to use inappropriate resources to complete course assignments may begin to

grow. The temptation can become even stronger when students develop the feeling that they are all alone in their course with little contact or interaction with the instructor of peers.

Designing online courses that promote academic integrity

The scenario and concerns mentioned above should not be considered a simple reality of online course deliver. In truth, academic integrity is something that all faculty members must work to promote in any instructional environment. However, with regard to online course delivery, there are design features that can specifically promote academic integrity in this environment.

First, online course materials should clearly state that academic dishonesty is not acceptable and then clear examples should be given to illustrate the kind of activities that the student should avoid. Since institutional policies are seen as one factor that has an influence on a student's view of academic dishonest, it is important to clearly outline for the student what the policy is in all online courses. Further, by giving specific examples, faculty can help students avoid misunderstandings about what the policy actually means. While many students would never turn in someone else's paper as their own, these same students may be tempted to copy and paste sections of their assignments from the Internet, justifying this activity as research.

Secondly, online course materials should include a high degree of interaction. Interaction may be developed in several ways and should work to increase the student's contact with the content, the instructor, and peers. A variety of tools can be used to increase interaction such as chat, bulletin boards, MOOs, email, etc. Faculty using these tools can achieve variety in their courses and decrease the perception by students that the instructor is really not there or is not paying attention to the work they are doing. Further, an instructor can use these tools to facilitate cooperative instructional strategies where students work in peer groups. Using cooperative strategies in online courses help to enculturate the student into the course by developing a support structure where students can become knowledgeable of course norms. In interactive, well-supported cooperative environments, student peers help to encourage academic integrity and adherence to course policies. Faculty who make good use of interaction strategies will reduce the temptation of the student to seek outside help and increase student satisfaction with the course.

Lastly, online courses should be designed to include a variety of evaluation methods. With a single evaluation method, a multiple-choice test for example, a true picture of a student's understanding is difficult to achieve. By using multiple evaluation methods, a trend can be identified with regard to student performance and understanding. This is equally true in both online and traditional environments. In a traditional classroom where a student may be very quiet during the semester and three multiple choice exams and a final examination are used for the course grade, it can be difficult to determine if the student understands the material, simply is good at memorization, or cheats. In courses that use multiple evaluation methods, the trend for a student's work can be compared to individual assignments. If a situation occurs where one paper is turned in at a higher level of understanding or quality than has been seen in other course interactions, the possibility of academic dishonesty may be present. Likewise, a student's

work trend can be used to guide the student to higher levels of understanding. As students come to realize that their work is being viewed and evaluated, and that feedback is being given, they will feel more attached to the course environment, and academic integrity will be promoted.

Final thoughts

It has been said that perception often becomes reality. In the context of online course delivery, a person's perception about this type of delivery can directly shape the satisfaction and performance in the course. With regard to academic integrity, there are many different views as to the type of activities that students should or should not be allowed to use to complete their course assignments. Likewise, there are differences of opinion as to the ease in which students could chose to use inappropriate aids to complete course assignments online as compared to traditional courses. However, this paper has attempted to outline three components of online course design that may promote academic integrity. Courses that clearly specify the institution's and instructor's policy about academic dishonesty, along with examples, help students to be knowledgeable and understand the need for academic integrity. Courses that have a high degree of interaction between the student and course content, the instructor, and peers can promote a sense of being connected and will help enculturate students into acceptable norms for course performance. And finally, courses that use a variety of evaluation methods can mark trends in a student's performance that can help a faculty member assist in a student's growth while at the same time helping to identify potential dishonesty.

There are no easy answers to the many questions that are associated with online course delivery. It is important to understand that many different people who become involved in online learning do so for many different reasons. By understanding these reasons, courses can be designed in a manner that can facilitate a faculty members satisfaction as well as the success students. Through the process students will have greater opportunity to grow, be successful, and have a high degree of academic integrity.

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